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Keeper of the Spiral Stories

# The Scorched Empire – The First Omen

*A Chronicle of the Spiral Age*

by **Appleseed Jan**

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*"When the egg is scorched, the empire must shed its shell . . ."*

# Prologue

## A Whisper Beneath the Dung

The cattle had gone.
Vanished. Evaporated. Left not even a splatter behind.

This was, understandably, concerning. Not just because cattle rarely vanish, but because the patrolling Forager Division—whose job includes noticing exactly such things—had not, in fact, noticed.

The Forager Division is also known for not noticing several incidents involving stampedes, a thunderstorm, and that time a cow sat on the northern wing of the nursery dome. Their official motto is: "We forage, not forecast."

Instead, they returned from their scouting expedition carrying oddly dry fragments of dung, muttering about cracked soil and an “unsettling hush in the thistle zones.”

Below the surface, in the Royal Chamber carved from sunbaked clay and the ever-patient scratching of generations of mandibles, the Queen convened an emergency gathering of her Ancient Advisory Circle.

The Queen, resplendent in her ceremonial carapace polish, sat upon the Gilded Grain, a revered throne made from a golden barley kernel, once believed to have descended from the heavens. (*It most likely fell off a cow’s dinner. This fact is not widely discussed in polite society*.) She regarded her advisors in silence.

Arrayed before her stood four of the oldest ants in the colony, each of them so ancient their exoskeletons had creases.

“It's the heat,” rasped Elder Keph, whose antennae drooped like the whiskers of a wilting sage. “The soil hums. I haven’t felt it sing like this since . . . ” He paused, searching memory’s dustiest filing cabinet. “. . . Well, never, actually.”

“The dung crumbles at the touch,” hissed Matron Theryn. “That only happens before the Season of Retreat. Or after the Season of Overwatering. Possibly during the Time of Very Slight Droughts. Or just Wednesdays.”

Archivist Sarek shuffled forward, her joints making noises like sandpaper arguing with gravel. “I . . . I remember something,” she croaked. “A myth, told to me by my predecessor’s mentor’s assistant.”

The Queen lifted an antenna, regal and questioning.

Sarek nodded solemnly. “It went like this: *When the land burns and the sky rages, the world is ending*.”

A silence descended upon the chamber. Even Keph blinked.

“Ending?” whispered Theryn. “As in . . . metaphoric ending? Or *ending* ending?”

“It is unclear,” said Sarek. “My mentor was very fond of allegory. And sugar fungus.”

The Queen’s voice echoed with royal precision. “Then we must know. I task you, Archivist, with finding the original account. Unearth it from wherever myths go to ferment.”

Sarek bowed low. “I shall open . . . the Forbidden Drawer.” (*The Forbidden Drawer is not, strictly speaking, forbidden. It’s more “strongly discouraged.” Mainly because it’s tied shut with centipede silk and contains a scroll last handled during the Great Mite Infestation. Also, it smells*.)

Gasps rippled through the chamber. Elder Gallea fainted gently into a pile of ceremonial dust.

The Queen extended both forelegs in blessing. “May the ancestors guide your antennae, Archivist. And may their whispers be clearer than their handwriting.” (*The Ancients were notoriously bad scribes. One myth once read “beware the blazing sky bird,” which later turned out to mean “look out for hot pigeon droppings.”*)

And so, under the warming soil and whispering roots, the wheels of prophecy—or at least long-forgotten dramatic storytelling—began to turn once more.

The Colony did not yet know it stood on the precipice of legend.
But the ancestors had stirred.
And they were as confused as everyone else.

# Chapter 1

# The Reading of the Black Sun

The Forbidden Drawer had not been opened since the Great Mite Infestation of 213, which—according to surviving footnotes—was a time of such chaos that even the Queen's personal guard hid in a moldy walnut shell for three days. The infestation ended not with a battle, but a bargain: one half of the pantry in exchange for never coming back.

So, when Archivist Sarek finally emerged from the Vault of Forgotten Scrolls, dragging behind her a scroll wrapped in centipede silk and streaked with what she called "ceremonial mildew" (though it smelled more like regret), the colony gathered with collective awe, trepidation, and at least three different kinds of fungus allergy.

She paused beneath the Central Forum's stone overhang, antennae bobbing theatrically, scroll bundled beneath one foreleg like a religious artifact—or perhaps a mistake wrapped in too much confidence.

"*Your Majesty,*" she intoned, sounding both reverent and winded, "I have consulted the Ancients, the half-remembered, and several mislabeled footnotes. There were references to the *Tale of the Black Sun and the Crawling Flame* scattered among the shelved scroll fragments, but the entire myth . . . has not survived. It was—well—very long ago. Possibly pre-dung currency."

The Queen, poised and unshaken in her golden carapace, leaned forward. "So, this is not the full account?"

Sarek gave a delicate shrug, attempting dignity but mostly producing the audible pop of an old joint. "It appears this scroll contains only the Ancient Verse itself. The rest—interpretations, commentary, mystical doodles—has been . . . nibbled."

She offered the scroll reverently. "This is all that remains, Your Majesty."

The Queen accepted it with ceremonial calm, as though weighing a prophecy in one limb and a rapidly fraying civilization in the other. She turned to the gathered assembly.

"Let it be read aloud," she declared. "Word for word. Let the colony hear what the Ancients have left us."

A hushed stir passed through the assembled ants—a ripple of anticipation laced with unearned clarity.

Sarek bowed (slowly, with a noise like crumpling parchment), then turned with theatrical flair and waved toward Advisor Teth, who had been loitering just off to the side, looking very much like a scholar forcibly resisting the urge to correct someone's pronunciation of "myth."

Teth approached, solemn, scroll now in his possession. With a quiet cough and one steely glance at Sarek (who had already begun misremembering the myth to herself under her breath), he began:

"*When the land burns and the sky rages,*
*And the Crawling Flame coils through hollow stone,*
*A beast of weeping granite shall rise in the east.*

*In the time of the Scorched Egg, when the shell splits wide,*
*The Empire must wear wings of shade,*
*And walk backward through the tunnels of time,*
*Or be cooked within its sacred shell.*"

There was a brief silence, the kind one hears just before ritual panic.

And then—predictably—chaos.

"Oh, sacred antennae—*a beast of stone*!" gasped Elder Khet. "It weeps! *Why does it weep*?!"

"We must go east!" barked a warrior. "Find it! Hug it! Kill it! Hug-kill it!"

A priest sobbed, "The shell is splitting! Someone *check the egg vault*!"

Teth raised a forelimb for attention. "My friends, it is *symbolic*—the 'egg' is clearly our environment, the heat, the shifting—"

"Wings of shade!" someone shouted. "We must construct *shadow harnesses*! I shall wear twelve!"

An Excitement Division cadet gasped aloud. "*Backwards tunnels*! That's it! We'll dig backward! Confuse the sun!"

From across the chamber came a dry, clicking noise—something between a scoff and a death rattle. A grizzled engineer-ant, his carapace worn and spiraled with pigment, stepped forward with slow, deliberate clacks. His name was Foreman Kreel, but all knew him by title: Helix Keeper.

"*No, you idiot*," he said, in the ritual cadence of ant-speak. "We must build spiral tunnels."

Gasps fluttered like pollen.

Kreel lifted a drawing etched in fungus ink—concentric rings like a great coiled intestine. "This is what the myth *truly* means. 'Walk backward through the tunnels of time' clearly refers to the *Path of the Spiral*, which reflects inward. The past lies *behind us*—we must circle it until the center is revealed."

Sarek beamed. "Yes! As I've always said. The Crawling Flame fears loops!"

"You said it was a fire snake in the laundry shaft," muttered Teth.

"And yet *here we are*," Sarek replied smugly.

At the edge of the forum, Worker Luma had stopped sweeping ash flakes and now stared at the scroll. ". . . coils through hollow stone . . ." she murmured. She had just come from the old irrigation ducts—cracked stone, heat surging upward. Something was rising.

A young Enthusiast bounded up to her. "Are you joining the Spiral Rite? We're starting tunnel-helical formations by sundown!"

Luma blinked. "I think the ground's just getting hot."

"Exactly!" chirped the Enthusiast. "The myth is real!"

Luma sighed, looking once more at the scroll, at the colony, at the absurdity rapidly becoming policy.

"Yeah . . . just not the way you think."

And so, the Spiral Initiative began.
The Helix Keepers chanted geometry in the dark.
Teth brooded in silence, clutching metaphors like wounds.
Sarek declared the whole thing a triumph and requested three cushions.
And Luma, quietly, began to follow the heat.

A reluctant folk hero in the making.

# Chapter 2

## The Spiral Consent

The Queen's chamber, thick with the scent of fungus-oil and royal pheromones, echoed faintly with murmurs from the outer galleries. Though the heat had not yet breached the inner sanctum, even the eggs lay uneasy in their waxen cradles. Attendants fanned the Queen with the wings of dead beetles, but her mandibles clicked irritably. She had not slept in three sun-turns.

A rustling approached—measured, rhythmic, almost ceremonial.

The Helix Keepers had arrived.

They entered in single file, each bearing a curve-blade shaped like a crescent larva. Their antennae curled in ritual spirals, tipped in soot from the Shrine of Shaded Labyrinths. Their leader, an elder named Forecoil Drexx, stepped forward and bowed, his thorax marked with the swirling sigil of the Burrowers.

“Majesty of the Depths,” he intoned, “we bring tidings of pattern and peril.”

The Queen did not rise. Her gaze was flat. “Speak, Drexx. But swiftly. My chambers melt.”

He bowed again, then with exaggerated calm, produced a scroll of bark-fiber inked in looping lines.

“We have consulted the *Canticus Coilum*, the Third Turning of the Spiral Texts. It speaks clearly now. The Crawling Flame hunts certainty. It walks the straight line. It devours the unbent path.”

Whispers rippled through the chamber.

“The Flame knows the straight path,” Drexx said, his voice rising with conviction. “It hunts by certainty. But a spiral . . . ah! A spiral dances. A spiral lives. A spiral deceives.”

One of the advisors coughed—a brittle sound. “You propose to confuse a force of nature with geometry?”

Drexx turned slowly. “Not confuse. Outwit. The Spiral is not confusion—it is wisdom. The Spiral is the shape of life. Of survival.”

The Queen drummed her forelimbs against her dais.

“And you would have us carve our transport tunnels like—like drunken termite scribblings? You realize the burden of such a task?”

Forecoil Drexx did not blink. “The labor is worth it, if it saves the colony.”

General Axas, chief Burrower, leaned close to one of his engineers near the back of the chamber.

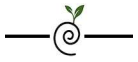
“I think she’s mad,” he muttered.

“Mad or not,” the engineer replied, “the Burrowers are listening. And they’d rather dig nonsense than melt.”

Silence followed. One of the guards shifted awkwardly; a larva somewhere squealed and was hushed.

The Queen’s antennae drooped, just slightly. Her voice was tired when she spoke next.

“So be it. Let the Spiral be carved. But if the Flame is fooled—” her mandibles snapped together, “—it had better be very, very stupid.”



*Construction begins . . .*

And so, the colony turned. The straight tunnels of old were abandoned—labeled heretical, even dangerous. Across the main atrium, a waxy banner was unfurled, inscribed with the Helix Keepers' new doctrine: **Curve or burn**.

Burrowers set to work at once. Their mandibles chipped, their limbs ached, but they traced perfect spirals beneath the soil. Every turn was measured to the sacred angle. Some even spun themselves dizzy with zeal, collapsing in reverence before the first full coil was laid.

The first spiral, dubbed the Sanctuary Coil, was carved near the southern root cluster. Engineers grumbled that it wasted space. Axas designed counter-supports to keep it from caving in on itself, quietly ensuring it didn’t kill anyone despite the objections.

To most, it was madness. But the Burrowers whispered prayers with every twist. They believed each curl bought the colony a moment more. They believed the Crawling Flame was watching—and hesitating.

And perhaps it was.

Or perhaps the heat was just rising.

# Chapter 3

## Wings of Shade and Other Nonsense

At first, it was just stories.

The *Verse of the Black Sun and Crawling Flame*, once dusty script kept behind mold-rubbed shell in the Archive Vault, had taken on new life in the mouths of the Tellers—a newly emerged caste of performer-historians with flared antennae, painted thoraxes, and a dangerous disregard for precision.

They performed nightly in the cracked galleries, surrounded by fungus lamps and gasping larvae. With each retelling, the myth grew stranger, bolder, and more theatrical. What was once a grim caution became glorious spectacle.

"*And lo!*" cried one Teller named Silek, balancing atop a dead root stump, "*The Flame did roar with hunger! But the Spiral shivered, and it was confused! And so, the Flame consumed itself in frustration*!"

The crowd gasped.

He threw up a puff of crushed fungus spores for dramatic effect.

The spores caused several workers to sneeze uncontrollably.

This only deepened the performance's reputation.

*Rituals of misunderstanding . . .*

Before long, *interpretations* became doctrine.

The first trend arrived quietly. Worker ants began strapping beetle wing casings to their backs with silk thread. A group calling themselves the Wings of Shade believed these crude, carapace capes would reflect heat, citing a passage they misquoted as:

"*Only those armored in shade shall walk unburnt beneath the Eye.*"

The original verse refers to seeking cover and conserving resources, symbolic of wisdom, adaptation, and sheltering behavior, but the absurdity was now gospel.

The Wings of Shade movement took flight—literally and figuratively—as forager castes began carrying wide flakes of leaf or beetle shell over their backs in ceremonial mimicry of flight. This was interpreted from a single scorched glyph, likely depicting a dragonfly. Interpretations diverged rapidly. Some believed the "wings" were meant to repel the heat directly; others, that they signified spiritual elevation above the surface altogether. A few ants flapped in place for hours, attempting to 'rise from sin.' One aspirant tried to leap into a grasshopper's flight path. The Queen, observing all this from her sunken chamber, reportedly muttered, "At least they're not chewing the tunnel supports this week."

A new sect formed, inspired by the line, "*A beast of weeping granite shall rise in the east*." Believing this prophecy imminent, they began painting small pebbles with soot and berry pulp—vivid black tears streaming from etched eyes. The ants placed these "weeping stones" at sunrise-facing alcoves and bowed before them in murmured reverence:

"Stone Beast . . . weep eastward . . . deliver us from fire."

A circle of nurse ants maintained daily vigils around particularly expressive stones. Some whispered that a certain quartz-laced rock had blinked at dawn. Skeptics noted that dew, when available, often condensed more readily on those particular shapes—though this too was folded into the lore. Dew was thus declared the Tears of the Beast, a sign of impending salvation or judgment, depending on the interpreter's tone.

In a far alcove, one solitary ant was observed 'weeping eastward' at sunrise, convinced this would summon the Beast of Stone, a misunderstood symbol of seasonal change mentioned once in a partially destroyed verse.

"*Its eyes are cold. Its body, unmoving. It comes only to those who mourn with the morning*."

And so, each dawn, Ant Pel was found sobbing quietly in the eastern vent, occasionally interrupted by sanitation teams.

This only deepened the performance's reputation.

*Then came the Backward Walkers . . .*

Meanwhile, a splinter group known as the Backward Walkers believed the colony had already erred by proceeding forward through the prophecy. Their solution: retrace every step—literally—by walking backward through the tunnels in solemn silence. This proved both inefficient and dangerous, particularly at junctions, and led to at least three minor pile-ups and one unfortunate encounter with a confused earwig. Regardless, the Backward Walkers remained devout, believing retrogression to be the path to renewal.

Claiming that movement in reverse symbolized 'the undoing of solar progress,' they declared all forward motion an insult to the Crawling Flame. Entire lines of workers were seen backing up through tunnels, bumping into pillars, each other, and in one tragicomic case, a chamber of stored larvae.

Petitions were made to the Queen to outlaw forward movement on Thursdays.

The Queen did not dignify them with response.

But the Tellers did.

A particularly deranged fringe sect called the Ashen Radiants began collecting burnt leaf tips and daubing tiny sun-symbols onto fungus walls in soot. These black suns were considered to be 'tamed flames'—divine symbols of conquered heat.

They built a shrine out of caterpillar droppings and sat in worshipful circles, chanting:

"*The dark sun does not burn. We kneel before its mercy.*"

An engineer attempting to clean the shrine was chased off with a fermented aphid leg.

Meanwhile, the colony buzzed with interpretations of a line from the myth's second stanza:

"*And when the Scorched Egg cracked, silence fell upon the land.*"

This single metaphor led to the now infamous Scorched Egg Parade, in which hard-boiled beetle eggs were paraded solemnly through the mid-level tunnels on little bark platforms. The event was accompanied by chanting, solemn humming, and occasional egg juggling by more irreverent attendants.

One parade ended in disaster when an egg fell and was devoured by a curious soldier ant who hadn't been briefed.

In one dimly lit nursery chamber, a group of Literalist nurse ants had gathered around a pebble painted like the sun.

Nurse Ant Kelti, her antennae styled with yolk-colored berry paste, barked out commands.

“The egg must be positioned precisely three antenna-lengths from the incense pebble,” she instructed.

“But why?” a larva whispered.

“To prevent total immolation, obviously,” Kelti replied with dramatic flair.

The young ants watched in fascinated silence as Kelti placed a hard-boiled egg—recently repurposed from food storage—at the center of the chamber.

“Now,” she intoned, “we chant the Words of Cooling.”

And they did:

“*Scorch no more, O glowing sphere.*
*Moisture, descend from above.*
*Crack the egg, not the Empire.*”

Just as she finished, the egg wobbled, rolled slightly, and slipped into a drainage tunnel with a wet plop.

**Gasps!**

“*A sign*!” Kelti shouted, antennae raised. “*The gods are pleased—they have taken the offering*!”

Behind her, a skeptical sanitation worker muttered, “Pretty sure the drain took it.”

*The Queen’s tightrope . . .*

The Queen watched this unfold with an expression best described as regal dismay.

“Cultural morale,” said one advisor. “It strengthens cohesion.”

“Cultural contagion,” grumbled another. “They are walking backward, Tixxa. That’s not cohesion—it’s larval-grade idiocy.”

But it was Sarek, now half-lucid and speaking in riddles, who voiced the deepest concern:

“They do not see the fire crawling beneath the shell of metaphor.”

Her warning was ignored.

*Heat, myth, and the divided mind . . .*

Ironically, amidst the absurdity, some changes *worked*. The spiral tunnel, though designed by mystical mandate, proved structurally ingenious. It slowed heat transfer, diverted airflow, and provided new shaded galleries. Surprisingly, it trapped moisture and, along with the regulated airflow, worked unintentionally well. It offered something none of the other plans did: beauty. The tunnels were graceful arcs, strange curving cathedrals of shade and slope.

Luma, while documenting water retention with practical indifference, paused beneath a particularly elegant arc. The curve framed a shaft of filtered light, illuminating a bead of moisture clinging to the dirt like a suspended jewel. She made a note in her report, adding a dry comment about the accidental elegance of religious engineering. But as she gazed upward at the spiraling form, something shifted. Not faith—but a recognition: the spiral’s benefit was coincidental, not mystical. It worked not *because* of prophecy, but in spite of it.

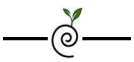
It was the kind of success born not of divine clarity but of obsessive confusion, accidental insight, and a thousand tiny overreactions. She sighed, then moved on. The soil beneath her feet was cooler.

The Symbolites, followers of metaphor and mystery, claimed victory.

The Literalists, increasingly fanatical in their enactments, began rejecting non-ritual innovations, claiming practicality was heresy.

Soon the colony faced not just a climate crisis, but a schism.

A civil rupture brewed in the galleries: workers arguing over flame-shaped charms, debating whether dreams of water were signs from the Flame or just dehydration.



In the deep galleries, where the soil ran warm and silence lingered, the true fire pressed closer.

And still, the colony danced in spirals—some in faith, some in farce.

# Chapter 4

# Omens Unearthed

The Queen's chamber was unusually quiet.

The heat above had turned brutal; scouts whispered of blistered carapaces, of grasshoppers abandoning their eggs, of cracked dung crusts that flaked like old bark. Within the cool depth of the royal chamber, the elders debated myth in thick spirals—one spoke of 'leaf-halo days' another of 'the Season of Stinging Stones.' Sarek, giddy with remembrance, was citing *The Fifth Scroll of Cinders* and misquoting half of it.

"And when the sun weeps sideways, only the flat-footed shall endure!" she crowed, utterly confident.

The Queen's mandibles twitched. She had been patient long enough.

And then, from the edge of the chamber, a voice interrupted—soft, awkward, and entirely unexpected.

"Begging pardon, Your Majesty. I, um. I might have something. Not a myth. Just . . . an observation."

All heads turned. Worker Luma—dust-covered, small, and perfectly ordinary in every respect—stepped forward. She carried something in her trembling mandibles: a scorched grain of barley, blackened on one side.

"I found this near the surface," she said, "buried just beneath a patch of dead moss. It's . . . cooked, I think. The soil is baking the food from underneath."

She laid the grain down on a flake of beetle shell. It clinked slightly. The chamber fell still.

Sarek leaned forward, squinting with great ceremony. "Ah! The Sun-Blessed Egg!" she declared triumphantly. "Roasted in tribute to the Crawling Flame. A most auspicious sign! We should bury more grains. Thousands!"

The Queen frowned. "No. There will be no burying."

The Queen ordered workers be summoned to begin constructing a storage chamber separate from the storage chamber that keeps the colony stores.

She leaned down, studying Luma closely—not as one regards a mythmaker, but as one regards a tool that has, quite unexpectedly, struck flint.

"Where did you say you found this?"

Luma hesitated. “Near the Western Hollow, ma’am. Just beyond the dung ridge.”

“Scout that region further. Have another group of workers collect all of the barley grains they find in that region.” the Queen said. “And tell no one else—for now. I wish to know if we face a season . . . or a story.”

From the shadows behind a column of carved larval husk, Teth smiled faintly. He was already taking notes in the dust with a foreleg.

Luma blinked, suddenly aware she might have just changed the colony’s fate with a burnt breakfast.

And above them all, Sarek whispered to no one in particular:

“When the egg is scorched, the empire must shed its shell . . . or be cooked within it!” She seemed very pleased with herself.

*The hollow and the heat . . .*

Luma led the workers to the Western Hollow. She carried no ceremonial blade, no sacred spool of scent-line. Just a water-lump strapped to her side and a wax-sealed scroll to sketch soil temperature and granule softness.

Having instructed the workers to wait, she walked slowly, not with reverence, but with the careful gait of one watching for cracks beneath her.

The surface was blistering. Dead moss curled like old paper, and here and there, she found more blackened grains. Not scorched in fire—but *baked*. The soil itself, down to three antennae-lengths deep, radiated warmth like a shallow oven.

Having ascertained that the ground was safe, she instructed the workers to gather the grain.

She measured. She sketched. She muttered under her breath.

And still, something gnawed at her. This wasn't seasonal. This wasn't myth. This was change.

*The chamber of blemished grain . . .*

The new chamber smelled of raw soil and damp resin. Piles of scar-marked, blackened barley rested in the gloom, pale streaks against the dark like tiny scars upon the colony's hope.

Luma stepped inside alone. She had told the workers she meant to tally the stores. Instead, she stood before the grain, antennae lowered, her mind circling a memory.

*"Two steps, child. One into what shall be, and one to seal it. If you hold the earth steady, it may yet unmark what was marred."*

Her grandmother's words pressed upon her now like the heat pressing from the soil. Foolishness, she told herself. A brood-nest tale. And yet . . .

She set her right foreleg firmly into the soil of What Shall Be. Then her left, sealing her stance in the coil of survival. She drew in the scent of earth and held the silence as though it were a vessel.

Nothing stirred. She breathed again, let the silence spill, and turned away, ashamed of her own whimsy.

But in the stillness behind her, a faint rustle whispered through the stacks, as though husks were loosening their scars.

Unseen, a shadow lingered at the chamber's edge, watching.

*The Sun-Blessed Egg Parade . . .*

Back in the heart of the colony, the Myth-keepers surged with inspiration. The Scorched Egg had taken hold of the communal imagination.

A parade was arranged.

Dozens of hard-boiled beetle eggs were painted with suns and scorch-marks. Ritual carriers—chosen for their roundness—rolled the eggs ceremonially through the tunnels, chanting:

“From flame we come! In flame we dine!”

One egg shattered against a corner and was declared a martyr. Its fragments were collected and worn as talismans.

The Literalist sect rejoiced. “It is the Season of Protein!” they announced. “The Crawling Flame has laid its blessing upon our plates!” They painted stones yellow and wept over them in the mornings, calling upon the “Weeping Beast of Granite” to hatch its salvation soon.

Some ants began sleeping with rocks.

Others tried to sleep *under* rocks.

Three suffocated.

*Rain in the air . . .*

Luma was the first to smell it. Not moisture exactly—but a thickness in the breeze, something electric in the underground draughts that filtered down through beetle-dug vents.

She tilted her head.

“Storm,” she whispered. And she didn’t know how she knew.

*Teth listens . . .*

Teth, ever observant, recorded Luma's reports with an alarming lack of annotation. He said little, only nodding as she described the soil's behavior and sketched humidity curls with soot-smudged forelegs.

He simply said, "You're not wrong. They'll panic soon. Try not to be underfoot when they do."

He handed her a silk-wrapped bundle. Inside were measurements of the spiral tunnel's curvature—*her* measurements. And at the bottom, a single line from one of the oldest scrolls:

"The Spiral shelters not from fire—but from the sky's surprise."

*The grain without scar . . .*

When the Queen descended to inspect the new chamber, the blemishes were gone. Not shriveled, not scarred—gone, as though no stain had ever touched the grain.

Gasps rippled like a current through the gathered workers.

From the rear, a voice wavered forward. "I saw her," it said. "Luma. She stood before the grain alone. She pressed her steps into the soil, one and then another, and breathed as if sealing the world."

The Queen's gaze narrowed upon Luma. "Is this true?"

Her antennae quivered. "My grandmother once spoke of such a rite. I thought it only a tale. But I . . . I tried."

The Helix Keepers raised their antennae high, their voices threading in solemn accord:

"*What is blemished may be unblemished, if the Spiral within accepts the Twin Steps.*"

> **Teth's Commentary (archival note):**
>
> "*Let none mistake the lesson: the Rite did not command the blemish to flee, but reminded us to choose firmly the coil we walk. If blemish fades, let it teach. If it remains, let it teach also. The Spiral erases nothing—it steadies the one who steps*."

Many called it chance. Others swore it proof. Either way, the story lingered, shadowing each new omen.

*A drizzle of applause . . .*

The Sun-Blessed Egg Parade reached its peak just past midday.

Chants echoed through the main thoroughfare:

“Bask and crack! Praise and peel! The Crawling Flame shall make us real!”

Painted eggs rolled along polished grooves. Ants tossed slivers of dry leaf like confetti. Even Sarek had been carried on a litter woven from beetle tendon and waxed root hair, proclaiming blessings to all who would listen—and many who wouldn’t.

It was then, in that giddy height of ritual, that the first drop fell.

A soft plink on a parade egg. Then another. A subtle darkening of dust. The air thickened—cooler, maybe. Heavy with a smell like wet clay and memory.

Rain.

Light. Scattered. Nothing they hadn’t seen before.

Some paused, tilting their antennae upward.

Others murmured: “The Beast weeps . . . !”

Teth watched from the arch of the spiral tunnel entrance. His face unreadable.

And far from the procession, in the Western Hollow, Luma crouched near the scorched moss beds, feeling the first chill drop strike her thorax.

She looked up.

The sky gave nothing away.

But underground, the scent of dampness slid into the deepest chambers.

The Empire buzzed with joy, prophecy, and relief.

And the rain fell, soft as a warning.

# Chapter 5

## The Flood and the Flame

At first, it was only the hush.

Crickets fell silent. The usual heat-hum of the pasture seemed to lean away. Beneath the moss canopy, ants slowed their work as the scent arrived—a sharp, metallic warning in the wind, like bitten air.

Luma looked up from her notes in the Western Hollow. A breeze brushed past her antennae and did not return.

The rain had begun softly the day before—so soft the colony had danced through it, rolling eggs and praising the "Beast's gentle sorrow." But now—

A lightless flash cracked the sky open like a beetle's carapace. Thunder did not follow. It *collided*.

And then the rain fell.

Not in drops.

In sheets. In ropes. In punishment.

*The collapse . . .*

The colony shuddered.

Water surged down every shaft, every tunnel mouth, like liquid death. The straight corridors—those proud geometries of discipline and symmetry—became rivers. Screams of alarm turned to silence as entire clusters of workers were swept into the dark. For a moment, it was not a city. It was a drain.

Wax reinforcements softened. Storage cells imploded. Larval chambers vanished in a rush.

In the heart of the turmoil, the Queen stood unmoving beneath her great root-arch, while water carved the world around her.

*The Sanctuary Coil . . .*

But one tunnel held.

The Sanctuary Coil—once derided as mystical nonsense, the spiraling vanity project of Forecoil Drexx—took the water and *danced with it*.

The curving chambers diverted the flood into smooth loops. Pressure ebbed. Velocity slowed. By the time the torrent reached the deepest coils, it was no longer a force—it was a visitor, redirected and dismissed. The drainage—accidental, unintended by Forecoil Drexx but expertly designed by Axas—allowed the flood to pass with minimal damage.

Luma, soaked and wide-eyed, helped drag stunned survivors into the side alcoves, her mandibles trembling from exhaustion and adrenaline. She watched as the water receded into the drainage cracks—engineered, long ago, by a then quiet design ant named Axas, who had never once spoken of prophecy.

Behind her, Forecoil Drexx knelt in prayer.

*Ritual ascending . . .*

By morning, the dead were counted. The survivors whispered.

The Spiral had saved them.

Forecoil Drexx, once an oddity, now revered, was lifted upon a slab of drift-wood and declared “Spindle of Salvation.” His sect, once mocked for their twisting processions and spiral chants, became keepers of a sudden truth. Pilgrims touched the walls of the coil in reverent silence. Some licked the damp stone.

A new ritual emerged within a day: Dance the Spiral to Confuse the Flame. Ants spun in slow, swaying patterns through the softened chambers, eyes closed, antennae trailing the wall’s curve. They claimed it sent vibrations to the Crawling Flame, throwing it off their scent.

New murals appeared overnight—scratching's of a golden coil wrapped protectively around a red serpent of fire. The flame had come. The spiral had won.

And faith was easier than uncertainty.

*The dismissal of Luma's observations . . .*

Luma tried to explain it.

"It's drainage. The angles, the airflow—they divert force laterally. The spiral isn't sacred, it's *practical*."

They smiled at her, gently.

"You speak in riddles," said one.

Another said, "Ah yes, the Spiral hides wisdom in the mundane. Very symbolic."

Even Drexx, bloated now with reverence, patted her on the shoulder and said, "You are a modest servant of the Spiral's will, dear Luma. The Flame burns away doubt. Be proud."

She stared at him, then walked away.

*The Queen mediates . . .*

The Queen did not speak during the spiral celebrations. She did not intervene when a faction of nurse ants refused to store food in straight chambers, citing "lineal arrogance." She watched in silence as living quarters were redrawn as corkscrews, and young workers were told to dream in loops.

But she summoned Teth.

And listened.

*Teth speaks . . .*

“The storm was not a judgment,” he said. “It was weather. And the heat was not divine trial—it was seasonal collapse. The pasture is changing. The ground no longer cools. The moss is thinning. The old dung ridges are dry bone. If they spiral deep enough, they’ll only find fire beneath.”

“And yet,” said the Queen, “they believe.”

Teth looked at her, soft-voiced.

“Belief is fine. But they are preparing to confuse the Flame, not to endure it.”

She gave no answer.

*A colony divided . . .*

New factions formed.

The Literalists claimed the Spiral must be obeyed *to the letter*. Every chamber curved, every motion prescribed. “To dig in straight lines is to dig one’s grave,” said a new pamphlet, smeared in ceremonial berry ink.

The Symbolists, more moderate, said the Spiral was a *message*, not a map. “It teaches us adaptation. The form is not the truth—it’s the *lesson* beneath the form.”

Both groups held their own parades. One twirled; one walked with purpose. Both shouted over the other.

The Queen remained quiet.

And somewhere in the Western Hollow, Luma dug a test chamber—straight, then curved, then spiraled.

Just to see what held.

# Chapter 6

## The New Balance

*Luma's discovery . . .*

The rains had passed. The tunnels dried. The murals cured in dust.

But the heat remained.

Luma spent her hours now far from the Spiral Sanctum, deep in the oldest hollow of the colony—the Archive Wastes. What was once storage for cracked scrolls, scent-faded glyphs, and mildewed myth fragments had become her refuge.

She wasn't looking for prophecies. She was looking for *patterns*.

Under a brittle flake of sun-etched bark, she found what she hadn't known to seek: old dig records from before her birth. Soil charts. Sub-layer heat data. Notes on fungal bloom failures. Symbols scrawled hastily by long-dead workers warned of a "baking season" generations past.

And there—just visible under a faded ink smear—a symbol shaped like a spiral.

Her breath caught.

She pulled the documents closer, careful not to snap them with her mandibles. There were drought reports, then flooding. A cycle.

The myth hadn't come from nowhere. It had come from *memory*.

*The revelation . . .*

They stood before the Queen at dusk, where the shade from the surface roots cast long, ceremonial lines across the chamber floor.

Luma carried no scroll. Only the copied dirtmaps and temperature sketches etched in her own careful mandible. Teth stood beside her—not to speak, but to witness. That, he insisted, was his role now.

“We’ve seen this before,” Luma said, her voice steady. “The cycle. The heat, the flooding, the scarcity. There are records in the Archive Wastes—forgotten dig notes and collapsed galleries from a time before myths were myths.”

She laid the data at the Queen’s feet.

“The Spiral saved lives,” she continued, “not because it was sacred—but because it *worked*. Its design disrupted force and heat. We can learn from that. Adapt. Build better.”

The chamber was quiet. Sarek, perched on a velveted moss pile, blinked slowly.

Then, with theatrical calm, she leaned forward.

“Indeed,” she said, “as foretold in the *Scroll of Ashwind*.” She recited, with uncharacteristic accuracy:

“When the shell of the world grows hot, seek not the flame, but the shadow of its memory.”

Even Teth’s antennae twitched.

“You quoted that correctly,” he murmured.

“Oh? I did?” Sarek looked delighted. “How *auspicious*. I must be entering my Prophetic Phase.”

The Queen ignored the mutterings. Her gaze lingered on the sketches. On Luma. On the Spiral Doctrine graffiti scrawled on her own chamber walls.

“Your findings,” she said slowly, “do not refute the myth. They *explain* it.”

She looked to her advisors. Some blinked. One choked on a celebratory grain flake.

“Let the faithful keep their rituals—those that do no harm. But let them understand. This omen was a *lesson*, not a test.”

She turned back to Luma.

“Your work will shape what comes next. Prepare your guidance for the builders.”

Luma bowed, confused and deeply tired.

Teth smiled, quietly.

*The Queen's decree . . .*

The Queen emerged from her chamber for the first time in many cycles.

She did not wear the ceremonial resin veil or the sunstone crest. Instead, she bore the simple scent-line of authority—firm, cool, unmistakable.

The colony assembled in the Spiral Commons, a new chamber dug in the shape of a double helix, not by design but by communal enthusiasm. Every wall pulsed with murals—coils, flames, beasts, and eggs. The myth had taken root.

The Queen's voice carried through the tunnels like a hive-thrum.

"Ants of the Empire. The First Omen has passed. It brought suffering—and salvation. It tested our strength, but more importantly, it taught us something greater:

The myth is not a rulebook. It is a *reminder*.

The Spiral saved us not because it was sacred, but because it worked. The prophecy was not a demand—it was a warning remembered through symbols.

From this day forward, let our rituals continue—as *culture,* not command. Let the Flame be a lesson, not a fear. Let us prepare, not just pray."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Confused, relieved, doubtful.

She continued:

"We shall rebuild: with curved galleries for cooling and spiral chambers for flow. We shall harvest dew with moss-lattices, use shaded stone for nesting, and dig *together*—Literalist and Symbolist, believer and observer.

This is our new way: a *Spiral of Understanding*. A model not of submission, but of survival."

At her side, Sarek beamed. "I *knew* the *Scroll of Ashwind* was the key," she whispered to no one.

Forecoil Drexx wept openly.

And Luma?

She stood among the crowd, unnoticed for the moment, nodding slowly. She wasn't sure it was everything she'd hoped—but it was something.

It was a start.

*The statue of Luma . . .*

They built it from burnt moss-char and layered wax-stone, coated in clay taken from the cooled floodbeds.

The Statue of Luma stood at the threshold of the Sanctuary Coil—small enough to be humble, large enough to be unavoidable. It showed her holding a scorched grain high in one foreleg, the spiral tunnel coiling behind her like a protective shell.

She did not approve the design.

"I never held the grain like that," she murmured. "And the coil didn't curl that dramatically—Axas made it that way because of airflow curves—"

"No, no," said the sculptor, brushing her aside with respectful fervor. "You *must* be standing in the Victory Pose. See? It aligns with the Third Glyph of Triumph. We consulted three archivists. One wept."

The statue's plaque read:

**LUMA THE LISTENER**

*Bearer of the Scorched Seed.*
*She heard the Flame's Whisper and guided the Empire to shelter.*

Below that, in smaller script:

*By her courage, the Spiral was known. By her wisdom, it was understood.*

The ants passed it daily—pausing to tap it three times with their left hindleg for insight.

Luma watched once. Only once. Then turned away and resumed checking the moisture levels in the new dew-traps.

Teth joined her that evening under a cooling root arch.

"They mean well," he said.

"They always do."

Teth glanced at her, bemused. "Congratulations. *You're* a myth now."

He grinned. “And a statue, too.”

“Would’ve preferred a shaded work alcove.”

They sat in silence a while.

Above them, the chant of the Spiral Doctrine echoed faintly through the tunnels:

“Circle to survive. Spiral to remember.”

And though it made her wince, Luma did not correct them.

Not today.

*Teth’s chronicle . . .*

In the dim light of a waxed-tunnel scriptorium, Teth worked alone.

Before him lay the cracked original: *The First Omen,* as recorded by early myth-keepers. It smelled of mildew and beetle-ink. The margins were crammed with contradictory scent notes and misremembered citations.

Beside it, a new scroll unrolled across the dirt—clean, unadorned, and written in Teth’s fine clawscript.

He was not rewriting the myth. He was reframing it.

He kept the verses from the *Tale of the Black Sun and the Crawling Flame*, the entire myth having been lost long ago.

“When the land burns and the sky rages,
And the Crawling Flame coils through hollow stone,
A beast of weeping granite shall rise in the east.

In the time of the Scorched Egg, when the shell splits wide,
The Empire must wear wings of shade,
And walk backward through the tunnels of time,
Or be cooked within its sacred shell.”

But after each line, he added a note. In smaller text. Not corrections—*context*.

(*The Black Sun* – Symbol of environmental imbalance or radical disruption. A metaphor for extreme heat and systemic breakdown.)

(*Crawling Flame* – Not a literal fire, but the slow, encroaching rise of lethal surface heat.)

(*Weeping Granite* – Likely refers to dew-collecting rocks or subsurface water signs. A misunderstood natural phenomenon.)

(*Scorched Egg* – Possibly inspired by cooked grains or sunbaked brood; a symbol of irreversible loss.)

(*Wings of Shade* – Symbolic of adaptation, sheltering strategies, and the wisdom to protect without fleeing.)

(*Walking Backward* – A metaphor for returning to overlooked ancestral practices or reassessing unsustainable progress.)

At the top of the scroll, in bold script, he inscribed a header:

**The First Omen: A Guide to Lessons in Symbol and Survival**
(*With Observational Annotations for Future Generations*)

*Note: This document seeks not to reject the myth, but to see through it. The myth is not false—it is metaphor. Its power lies not in obedience, but interpretation.*

He worked slowly, not because the task was difficult—but because the consequences were enormous.

Someday, he knew, this too would become myth. Misread. Misquoted. Perhaps revered for the wrong reasons. But he would give them a chance.

At the end of the scroll, he penned a final passage—not from the old myth, but his own voice:

*"We must remember: A truth told in symbols is not a lie. But it must be read with open eyes. These words are not commands. They are signs."*

He signed it not as the Queen's advisor or an archivist, but as himself:

—Teth, of the Second Coil

And then he blew gently to dry the ink.

*The larva and the Fire Dance . . .*

The sun sat low over the pasture, bleeding gold across cracked dung crusts and faded moss.

In a shallow chamber near the surface—one carved by younglings, not architects—a larva danced.

She had seen the murals. Heard the chants. Learned the teachings from both Literalist and Symbolist caretakers, who now cohabitated in uneasy peace. Her motions were wild and imprecise, spiraling and jagged, antennae twitching in mimicry of flame.

At her feet, a warm flat stone radiated heat from the day's light. She leapt over it with exaggerated flair.

"I dance the Spiral so the Flame will forget me!" she sang.

A cluster of young ones joined in, cheering. One larva, playing near a dew trap, recited a distorted version of the myth and giggled:

"When the Queen boiled the sun, she made the tunnels curvy so our legs wouldn't melt!"

Teth, from the corridor above, closed his eyes briefly, then he watched.

He leaned against a mural showing the Queen cloaked in sunfire, wielding a staff shaped like the Sanctuary Coil, banishing a writhing, red-eyed flame-beast into the earth.

He sighed.

"Not what happened," he muttered.

But he didn't correct them.

Behind him, in a cooler tunnel, Luma inspected dew collection trays, muttering about evaporation rates.

Teth returned his gaze to the young dancer. She wobbled. Fell. Laughed.

An elder nurse-ant gently helped her up and whispered, "Not like that. Like this." She twirled slowly, drawing a spiral in the dust with one leg.

The larva copied it, a little more graceful this time.

Teth smiled faintly. He took out a scrap of scroll and scribbled a line:

> "The cycle repeats. At least this time, with footnotes.
> Will we chase shadows—or seek the truth in their shape?"

Then he folded the scrap, tucked it behind the mural's edge, and turned to leave.

Just beyond the chamber, near the larval play tunnels, another mural caught his eye—new, still tacky with warm clay pigment.

It showed a golden spiral tunnel, coiled protectively around a tiny object: a single barley grain. At the tunnel's entrance stood a small ant—Luma—her posture unassuming, but outlined in radiant chalk. Above her, the sun was drawn weeping, its tears shaped like droplets of fire.

Etched in stylized script:

> "*She heard the Earth cook, and the Empire listened*."

Teth studied it for a long moment.

She wasn't shown as a warrior. Not a prophet. Just a listener—the first to notice, not to declare.

He exhaled, soft and long.

"There may be hope yet," he said quietly.

Then he walked back into the cool dark.

The First Omen had passed.

The Second would come.

Eventually.

*And so, they carried their grain into the dark, not knowing if they stored food or story, seed or omen — yet certain that what was buried might one day rise again, in coil or harvest, in memory or myth.*